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**COLOR
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INSIDE:

THE WORLD BEYOND THE MUPPETS



ABOVE: Kira, the Gelfling . . . one of the nicer creatures from the new movie "The Dark Crystal," produced by the creators of the Muppets and due for its Brisbane premiere this week. Story Page 10.

RIGHT: Jen and Kira, last survivors of the Gelfing race, set out to return the crystal shard and bring light to a dark world of mysterious creatures.

BELOW: Creators of "The Dark Crystal" surrounded by the products of their limitless imaginations. From left: Brian Froud, Jim Henson and Frank Oz.



The world beyond the Muppets

The Muppets are cute, cuddly and made a fortune. The creatures from 'The Dark Crystal' are malformed, malevolent — and cost \$30 million.

THE Muppet men have struck again! But if you expect more adventures of Miss Piggy, Kermit the Frog and Animal the mad drummer, you'll be disappointed this time around.

Muppet creator Jim Henson and his associate Frank Oz (who operates Miss Piggy) have started a whole new ball game. They have developed a new set of characters, far removed from the lovable pigs, frogs and bears that made them their first fortune.

Some of their new creations are, frankly, repulsive.

There are the vicious, reptilian Skeksis; beetle-like, killer troops called Garthrim and a High Chamberlain who is evil incarnate. Together with the Land Striders, the Gelflings and the urRu, they inhabit the weird world of a \$30 million fantasy film, "The Dark Crystal," opening in Brisbane on Friday at the Albert and Forum cinemas.

According to co-producer Gary Kurtz, who produced "Star Wars," the new movie will do for fantasy what Walt Disney did for mice and ducks and what "Star Wars" did for science fiction.

"The Dark Crystal" will appeal to adults and teenagers more than young children.

"The Dark Crystal" is Jim Henson's pet project, a film he's wanted to make for years. The financial success of the Muppets made it possible.

A mild, bearded man with a gift for creating a family atmosphere even on a film set, Henson says: "What I love is creating whole new worlds, starting from scratch and creating everybody who is in it."

"We've invented everything in 'The Dark Crystal,' right down to the sort of cups these creatures would drink from and the food they'd eat. Most films begin with someone writing a script. In our case, we began by developing the creatures. We took four years to make the puppets."

Work began on the film — the title refers to a magic crystal which keeps the evil Skeksis in power — in New York in 1978. By the time the film was shot in England in the summer of 1981, 480 people were involved (compared with, say, 150 for a normal film).

One of the key men was British fantasy artist Brian Froud, whom Henson hired on the strength of his picture books, like "The Land of Nod."

Froud recalls: "We had a sort of Muppet summit in New York and talked about the characters. Then we began building endless prototypes. No one had ever done anything like this before so we just had to feel our way."

"As it's turned out, 'The Dark Crystal' is

BRING THESE CHARACTERS TO LIFE AND SEE 'THE DARK CRYSTAL' FREE

★ **HERE'S** a children's coloring competition that could win you one of 20 prizes.

★ Ten city winners will receive free double passes to a screening of "The Dark Crystal."

★ Ten country winners, who would not be able to attend the city screenings, will receive free books, "The Tale of The Dark Crystal," by Donna Bass with drawings by Bruce McNally.

★ Color the picture at right and send your entry to "The Dark Crystal" competition, C/- The Sunday Mail, GPO Box 647, Brisbane, 4001.

★ Entries must be received no later than next Friday and the 20 winners' names will be published in The Sunday Mail next Sunday.

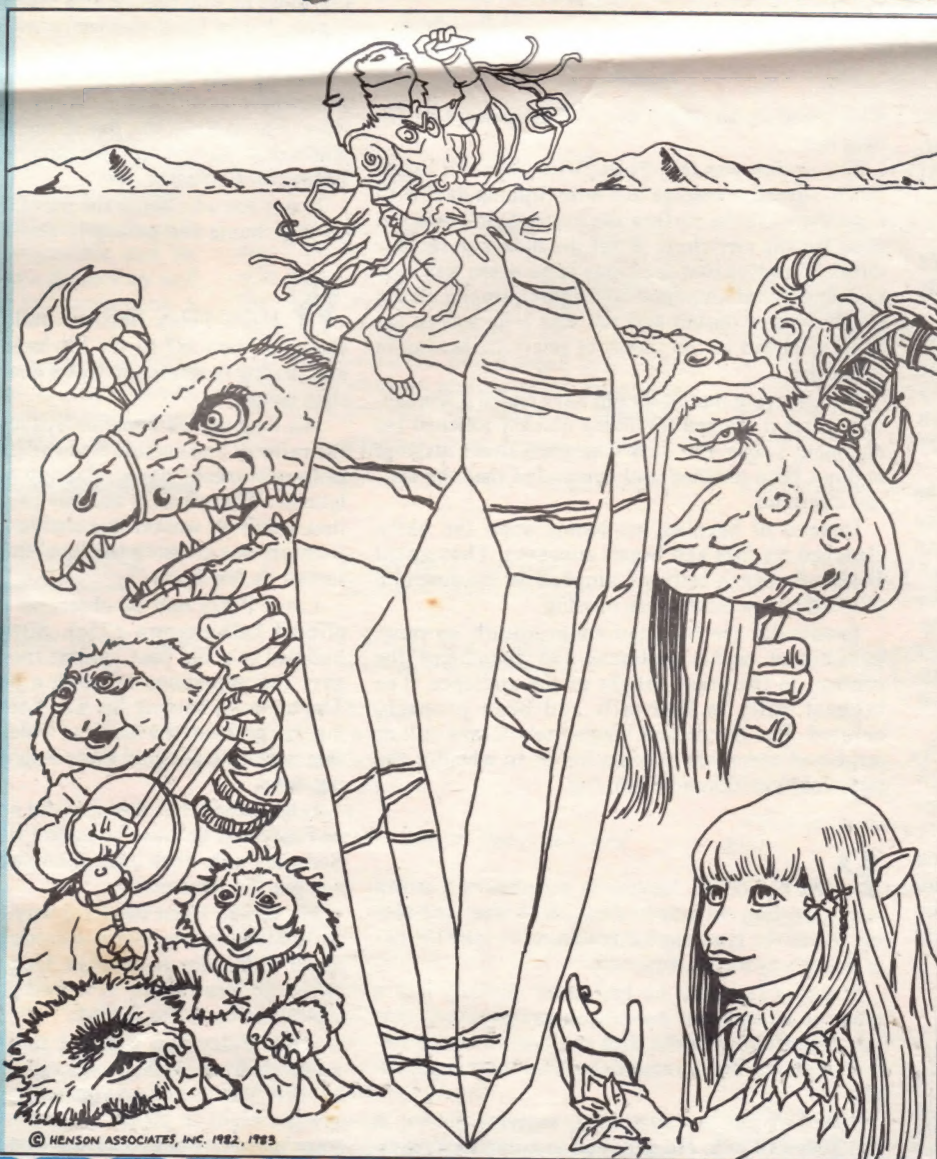
★ The competition is not open to employees of Queensland Newspapers or their families. The judge's decision will be final.

DON'T FORGET TO WRITE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS

NAME:

ADDRESS:

POSTCODE:





FAR LEFT: The Skeksis are about as evil and ugly a bunch of characters as you are likely ever to see — on the screen or anywhere else. This fellow is the worst of them all, the High Chamberlain himself.

LEFT: The Fizzgig, one of the few friendly characters in "The Dark Crystal," is the cuddly, if rather hairy, companion of Kira, the Gelfling.

BELOW: Here it is . . . this is what all the fuss is about: the dark crystal. Its missing shard has left the world in darkness and at the mercy of the Skeksis, their High Chamberlain and assorted other nightmares.

totally opposite to the Muppets. The Muppets were very simple puppets in bright colors with instantly identifiable characters.

"The puppets in 'The Dark Crystal' are more complex — the High Chamberlain has 21 moving parts — and they're sort of wrinkly-looking, in muted colors.

"Each scene is like a special effect, the kind of thing most horror films, for instance, save up for the last three seconds. We're giving people that quality all the way through."

The trigger that started "The Dark Crystal" on its way to reality — or should that read "unreality" — was when Henson, Oz and Froud were approached by Gary Kurtz, who was producing "The Empire Strikes Back," the sequel to "Star Wars."

"We wanted a special creature as a surprise in 'Empire,'" Kurtz says. "Jim and his team are simply the best at creature development in the world. We went to see them and they agreed to work with us." The result was Yoda, the long-eared, gnome-like Master who teaches Luke Skywalker the secrets of The Force.

"Yoda," Froud says, "is halfway between the Muppets and the creatures in 'The Dark Crystal.'"

By July, 1979, work on "The Dark Crystal" had progressed sufficiently for supervisor Sherry Amott to pack up and move, lock, stock, and barrel, from New York to London, to a new headquarters near Henson's Hampstead home.

"I turned over my packing case and that became my desk. For the first three weeks we had no phone, so I'd walk over to Jim's house and use his. I found literally everything I needed through the Yellow Pages!" Sherry Amott said.

"Everything" included artificial eyes, melted plastic soldiers (for the Skeksis' strange jewellery) and a special kind of foam rubber made only in Boston. "The foam was a problem. I'd thought anything I could find in America I could also find in England. But the main use for this particular foam is in air-conditioners and they don't use air conditioners in England."

To assist her, Sherry Amott assembled a team including art school graduates, dressmakers, puppet makers and people who had worked on props and costumes in the theatre.

While Amott's team built the characters, Henson was writing the script. He kept it



simple. "The Dark Crystal" tells the story of Jen the Gelfling and his quest to replace a missing piece of the crystal, thus ending the Skeksis's domination of his world.

Muppet fans will be glad to know that the Gelflings and uhRu will not entirely replace Miss Piggy, Kermit and Animal. Says Frank Oz: "The Muppets aren't dead by any means. We won't be doing any more TV shows, but we still have a great time performing those characters. In fact, in the early months of shooting 'The Dark Crystal' we were doing Polaroid commercials with the Muppets on weekends.

"We went from the very difficult work on the film to what was like a vacation for us. We were laughing until we cried. That was proof to us that we still wanted to do the Muppets."

Oz has worked for Henson for 18 years and can remember Muppet characters before they became Muppets. In fact, they began in commercials, then gradually appeared in guest slots on American TV variety shows.

"Ralph, the dog, was the star in those days," Oz says. "I remember we tried to get

Kermit on a show and nobody wanted him — they said, no thanks, not a frog."

Oz is baffled by Miss Piggy's rise to stardom. "The truth is, she's not very tall, she doesn't do a lot as a puppet and, of course, she's not human. Yet her character has transcended all of that and become this huge star. I've no idea how it happened."

Frank Oz thinks the nearest equivalent to Miss Piggy in "The Dark Crystal" is the High Chamberlain: "He's a bad guy, he'd kill his own mother, but he'd smile while he was doing it. His character was all bad, but it was my idea to include the smile."